The heart did not feature in European art until the later Middle Ages. The first illustration of a heart outside the anatomical literature occurred as late as the 13th century, in a French manuscript, written by an unknown poet and entitled Roman de la poire (Romance of the pear). This story takes its title from a scene in which the damsel offers a pear, analogous to Eve’s apple, to her sweetheart. In the tale, the suitor’s gaze is represented as an actual character called Douz Regart (Sweet Looks). In a miniature, within the calligraphic curve of a golden capital S, he is pictured kneeling before a lady and offering her the lover’s heart. The shape of this heart resembles the form of a pine cone—a shape that accords with descriptions of the heart in anatomical literature since Galen and Avicenna. This image of the heart was painted in a Paris studio in about 1255. There is a picture of a similarly shaped heart on an enamel pyxis from Limoges, which dates from the same period or perhaps slightly later. Both these hearts are held upside down, with their tips pointing upwards.

It was not until half a century later that an image of the heart appeared for the first time in a public work of art, in one of the innovative murals painted by Giotto di Bondone in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy, which dates from about 1305. Beneath images of the lives of the Virgin and Christ, Giotto painted personifications of vice and virtue. One of the virtues is Caritas, or Divine Love, who offers her heart to the Almighty above her in the upper right corner of the mural. This theme of the surrender of the heart to God had already been developed in theological literature, but here it is used for the first time in the visual arts as a religious symbol of love. Caritas holds the heart upside down, by the base, with its tip pointing upward (figure 1).

The way in which Giotto’s Caritas offers her heart was immediately copied by northern Italian artists, especially in Florence. For example, Caritas appears on the Stephaneschi altar in a painting attributed to the master of the Stephaneschi; a similar composition by a painter from Giotto’s workshop (perhaps the same master) is part of a mural in what is now the Bargello museum; and Caritas (in this case, with a flaming heart) is depicted in a painting by Taddeo Gaddi in Santa Croce. Later examples of such representations of Caritas were cast by Andrea Pisano on the bronze door of the south porch of the Baptistery in Florence (c 1337) and painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Publico in Sienna (c 1340) and by Andrea da Firenze in Santa Maria Novella in Florence (c 1365), where two images of Caritas can be seen.
Caritas was not the only character who was depicted holding a heart in this period. Somewhat earlier, in about 1315 in northern Italy, the Florentine jurist Francesco Barberino completed his widely read didactic poem _Documenti d’amore_, in which not Caritas but Conscientia is shown holding a heart in her hand. It is her own heart, which she has torn from her chest to demonstrate that she has a pure conscience.1 Again, the shape of this heart resembles that of a pine cone.

Such hearts were offered to a loved one or to God as an attribute displayed to the onlooker—Caritas’s heart symbolises her love, Conscientia’s her conscience. However, this particular way of holding an object in the hand is of a much earlier date. For example, a Caritas, dating from the 12th century, is shown in a German manuscript holding up not a heart but a vase.2 There is a similar Caritas holding a chalice on a 12th-century capital of the St Lazare Church in Autun, France. Such images of held objects indicate a classical influence—the artists were copying the way in which a Roman emperor was pictured holding the orb, or allegorical figures held their attributes.

The holding of the heart by its base with its tip pointing upwards remained current in the visual arts until the latter half of the 14th century. Thereafter, the convention was seen only incidentally. Two late examples, both dating from the first half of the 15th century, are the hearts held by St Anthony on a panel by Sassetti3 and on another panel from the school of Luca Signorelli, both of which are in the Diocesan Museum in Cortona, Italy.

From the middle of the 14th century, virtually all representations of the heart show it being held by the tip, with the base pointing upwards, thus conforming to its actual position in the thoracic cavity. This modern way of holding and displaying the heart thus made its début almost a 100 years after the earlier convention of depicting the heart with its tip pointing upwards. The first example of the new convention can be found on a German _Minnekästchen_, a coffret in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, USA, which dates from the second quarter of the 14th century. A young man presents his heart to Frau Minne, the German equivalent of the Goddess of Love. Another such heart is in a miniature in the _Roman d’Alexandre_,4 which was completed in about 1340 in the northeast of France. This change in the way in which the heart is held can be traced in ivory carvings with an amorous theme from this period.5,6

Thus, for 100 years, from the middle of the 13th century, the lover offers his heart to his sweetheart with the tip upwards; thereafter, it is presented with the base upwards.

In Italian painting, this change in the way of holding up the heart is also evident. In about 1360, Giovanni del Biondo, perhaps for the first time, painted a Caritas holding the heart by its point (figure 2).7 From then on, this convention was reflected in public works of art. Albeit from a later date, Fra Angelico’s _Virgin and Child (c 1435)_ is a choice example of the new style, with St Ignatius of Antioch and the Dominican monk, the Blessed Jacobus, each featuring holding a heart by its point.8

The heart is also shown in representations of medieval Mesoamerican heart sacrifices, an example being shown on an early Pipil stele, where it is offered to the Sun, its tip pointing upwards (figure 3).9 In later Mesoamerican representations, the heart is held with its base upwards.10,11 The way in which these hearts were held up is strikingly familiar to the “offering up” gesture of the Caritas figure in Europe, which is curious since there was no known contact between these cultures before the 16th century.

In the Middle Ages, the pine-cone-shaped heart was represented with a rounded base. It was only during the early years of the 14th century that the scalloped shape of the St Valentine heart, with a fold or dent in the base, made its appearance. Scalloped hearts can be seen before 1320 in the miniatures in Francesco Barberino’s _Documenti d’amore_ and also, albeit somewhat later, in northern Europe, in a manuscript collection from the Cistercian monastery in Brussels (figure 4).12 Although the oldest part of this collection dates from 1320, the manuscript that contains this deeply notched heart must be of a later date than the slightly indented Italian hearts from the first half of the 14th century. The change from the spherical to the scalloped form of the heart base happened more or less in train with the differing way in which the heart was held, and has dominated visual representations of the heart ever since.

Pierre Vinken is a retired co-chairman of Reed Elsevier, current owner of The Lancet.

References

Figure 3: Priest offers human heart sacrifice to the Sun, Cozamalhuapa stele (800–900 AD)

Figure 4: The heart as part of the Arma Christi, from second half of 14th century
Clinical picture: A haemophiliac patient with synovial osteochondromatosis of the ankle

R Cosentino, R De Stefano, E Selvi, E Frati, S Manca, S Manganelli, R Marcolongo

A 28-year-old man with type-A haemophilia came to our outpatient clinic complaining of left ankle pain and difficulty walking. Ankle radiographs showed a synovial osteochondromatosis (figure, left). We gave him prophylactic factor VIII and local, low-energy, extracorporeal shock wave therapy once a week for six weeks. His pain decreased, and remained improved at 6 months follow-up. He had no bleeding complications, and repeat radiographs 1 month after treatment had finished, showed reduced calcification (figure, right).

Institute of Rheumatology (R Cosentino MD, R De Stefano MD, E Selvi MD, E Frati MD, S Manca MD, S Manganelli MD, Prof R Marcolongo MD) University of Siena, Italy